

House Committee on International Relations  
"The State of U.S.-Turkish Relations,"  
Testimony  
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That something has gone terribly wrong in the important U.S.-Turkish relationship since the beginning of the Iraq War should not come as a surprise to most casual observers of current political events. A slew of articles on this side of the Atlantic have questioned the future of this relationship. I will not dwell much on how vital this relationship is to the United States in this audience. The more important question is how deep and long-lasting will this rupture be likely to be and what are its causes and remedies.

Let me start the discussion with two contradictory statements. First is that the current malaise in U.S.-Turkish relations is temporary in nature. Within a year or so from now – provided no unexpected and dramatic event occurs in Iraq – it is likely that these relations will return to their pre-Iraq war status. This said, however, it is also important to note that anti-Americanism in Turkey, as I will demonstrate below, is deeply rooted and different groups and institutions each have their own interests in articulating an anti-U.S. discourse. The war in Iraq, though this is not the only reason, has rekindled and exacerbated these feelings. A return to the status quo ante in U.S.-Turkish relations means, therefore, that while we will see a marked decline in the anti-American rhetoric in Turkey, the mistrust of the U.S. and its policies will remain unabated though relegated to below the surface.

### **Turkey, Iraq and the United States**

The recent manifestations of anti-Americanism in Turkey at both the public and official levels cannot be attributed solely to current U.S. policies and actions. Turkey is in the grips of what one can call a "nationalist moment." This is the result of a deep crisis of confidence and anxiety over developments it cannot control or influence. It is ironic that after having achieved what seemed to be the impossible, getting the European Union to commit to a date to begin accession negotiations, Turkey is mired in this kind of crisis.

At the root of Turkey's angst is the issue of Iraq and specifically the Kurds. The war in Iraq has completely upended Turkey's fundamental security interests in Iraq. Because Turkey has yet to come to grips with its Kurdish question, the emergence of Iraqi Kurds as serious contenders in Iraq, the fear of potential developments and their consequences in Turkey have unnerved Turks of all stripes. The Turkish-American relationship was built on a security platform and the Iraq war has put into question this essential understanding.

The U.S. and Turkey have similar visions for the kind of Iraq they would like to see emerge: they both hope for a democratic, unified and prosperous Iraq capable of both controlling its own diverse population and emerge as a source of stability in the region, perhaps even as a future counterweight to Iran.

On the other hand, what divides the United States and Turkey most of all is the lack of accord over future contingencies in Iraq, especially in the event of a U.S. failure in that country. The inability of the U.S. and the successive Iraqi governments to stem the violence in Iraq together with signs that Iraq may one day fall apart has led to the questioning of U.S. motives and plans. Turkish worries center primarily on the possible emergence of an Iraqi Kurdish entity, federal or independent. Turks also believe that their decision to deny the U.S. a second front against Saddam Hussein has privileged the Iraqi Kurds at their expense in American eyes and, therefore, the U.S. would be hard pressed to deny the Kurds what they want in the future. Some Turks are also convinced that the U.S. is out to punish them for their rejection of basing for the 4<sup>th</sup> ID.

There is a real possibility that Iraqi Kurds will end up with a robust federal, if not confederal arrangement, within Iraq. This will provide them with not just complete cultural autonomy and the recognition of Kurdish as the second official language in Iraq, but also with all kinds of political rights based on ethnicity. Ankara is afraid of the contagion or demonstration effect any Kurdish gains in Iraq would have on their own Kurdish population. This is why Ankara has strenuously resisted the creation of an ethnic-based Iraqi federation that especially privileges the Kurds by incorporating the oil-rich city of Kirkuk within their boundaries. Furthermore, Ankara has championed the rights of the Turkish-speaking Turkmen minority as a wedge against the Kurds in Iraq. Their Turkmen allies, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, however, have done very poorly in the January elections.

What terrifies Ankara even more is that the current violence and unrest in Iraq will end up in a division of Iraq, possibly along sectarian and ethnic lines thereby giving rise to an independent Kurdish state. Amidst these potential monumental developments for its perceived national security interests, Turkey sees that it has

been shut out of the consultation process and has little if any role to play or influence to yield in its neighbor Iraq.

It is the timing of the Iraq war with the beginning of the European Union negotiations which has proven to be an explosive mix. As the Turkish government deftly maneuvered the country to finally get a date from the Europeans, it is perceived as having had to make “concessions” to the EU regarding human rights, democratization and minority rights. Even though many of the constitutional changes along these lines have yet to be implemented, the fact remains that Turkish Kurds are likely to use the EU negotiation process to improve their cultural and perhaps even political conditions in Turkey. This goes to the heart of the Turkey’s conception of its national identity: there can be no minority, certainly no minority of this size, with such potentially disruptive demands.

Ankara and the Turkish public in general do not think that it has been rewarded either for the domestic “concessions” or the ones it has made regarding Cyprus. On Cyprus, the government in Ankara engineered a complete reversal in policy, got the Turkish Cypriots to resoundingly endorse the Annan plan, the reunification of the island and joining Europe despite the vociferous opposition of hardliners in both northern Cyprus and Turkey. The absence of any movement by either the U.S. or the Europeans to reduce the isolation of Turkish Cypriots in light of Greek Cypriot’s equally resounding vote against a solution on the island has put both the Turkish government and all who favored such a solution on the defensive. Similarly, the debate in Europe, especially in France, on the new European Constitution that has made opposition to Turkish accession to the EU a central theme, has further damaged Turkish self-confidence and belief that they would get a fair hearing in Europe.

Complicating the picture in Turkey further is the uneasy relationship between the current Turkish government led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Turkey’s establishment that views both with great suspicion. Given its Islamist origins, the AKP is suspected of having a hidden Islamist agenda. The AKP’s success in Europe, despite Turkey’s previously avowedly secular leaders’ failures in this regard, is perceived as a subtle attempt to move Turkey away from its Atatürkist principles under the guise of European membership. For the Turkish political establishment and AKP’s detractors, success in Iraq – defined as preventing the emergence of a robust Kurdish entity – has become a litmus test of the government’s nationalist bona fides.

The centrality of Iraq, the Kurdish question and unease with which Turks view Iraqi developments have also been influenced by symbolic yet unfortunate

events. The most important is the July 4, 2003 incident when U.S. troops raided an Iraqi Turkmen Front and Turkish Special Forces office in the Kurdish town of Suleymaniya. Tipped that the occupants of that compound were on the verge of initiating an assassination attempt, U.S. soldiers unceremoniously dispatched the Turkish troops to Baghdad with hoods on their heads – a treatment reserved for captured al-Qaeda terrorists. This event and the resulting political storm in Turkey were very damaging to the U.S. image in Turkey. No Turkish interlocutor will forget to remind his or her American counterparts of this event. This is despite the fact that within a year of the incident, in a sign that some officers had run amok, the Turkish military high command either cashiered out or allowed three generals in direct command of the Special Forces to retire.

### **U.S.-Turkish Relations a balance sheet**

At the onset of my testimony I argued that while the current malaise will soon be replaced by a return to the status quo ante, in other words that relations would improve but that Turkish suspicions of the U.S. would remain. I base this argument on the fact that while Turkey may not appear be as critical to U.S. interests as in the past – Turkey was part of the two containment exercises of the U.S. since World War II, first the containment of the USSR and later that of Saddam Hussein – there is no question that it remains a vital component of Washington's agenda in the Middle East. Stability in Turkey has always been a linchpin of both Democratic and Republican administrations, a fact which explains why it has been so important for Washington to push for a membership path for Turkey in the EU. Hence it is in the interest of the U.S. to come to a modus vivendi with Ankara. Similarly, Ankara needs the U.S. which has been its important partner, from the partnership in NATO to support for everyone of Turkey's challenges, economic or political.

It is important to note that despite the overused "strategic relationship" expression, the U.S. and Turkey have never managed to deepen their friendship beyond certain limits. In large part this is due to the fact that Turks were unable to look beyond their narrow and mostly domestic concerns of Islamism and Kurdish nationalism when approaching the U.S. The U.S. has not had with Turkey the same cultural, normative and historical bonds that it has with many European countries.

The high point of the U.S.-Turkish relationship came at the end of the 1990s. The Clinton administration had engineered the delivery on a silver platter of the fugitive Turkish Kurdish terrorist leader Ocalan, the most reviled and wanted man in Turkey who had spent almost 20 years in Damascus and Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon. President Clinton that year made a historic journey to Turkey following the earthquake that devastated many towns in Western

Turkey. He addressed the Turkish Parliament and despite some frank talk he was received as a real hero. No U.S. president had ever received such a welcome in Turkey (one ought to note that not many had visited Turkey either – itself an interesting point).

All this goodwill dissipated soon thereafter with the September 11 tragedy. It turns out that the goodwill on the Turkish side was not institutionally anchored especially in a society where almost everyone shares a sense of vulnerability. The secularists, the Islamists, the military, the center-left and center-right not too mention the nationalist extremists on both ends of the spectrum, all have their reasons to fear outside forces. In this sense, mistrust of the U.S. is not unique. However, given the importance of the American role in the post Cold War world and the longstanding nature of relations with Turkey, it is singularly problematic.

Turkish Islamists and fellow travelers so to say who had appreciated Washington's principled stand on issues regarding democratization and had been as pro-American one could fathom them to be, were the first to broke with the U.S. after September 11. For some it was too difficult to accept that Muslims had committed such a horrible act of political violence. Hence it must have been a plot; a U.S. plot, a Zionist one, a joint CIS-Mossad operation? For others it was the attack on Afghanistan that broke the camel's back. The attack was after all by a non-Muslim country on a Muslim one. In any event, a military operation against Saddam Hussein appeared to be imminent and with that it was clear that another Muslim country would be subject to "punishment" by Washington. Hence, the Islamists reverted back to their previous anti-Americanism that tended to blame everything on the U.S. and its Israeli ally. With the return to these explanations, the world also was more comfortable.

For the ruling Justice and Development Party, which has deep roots in Turkey's Islamist political movement, events in Iraq were deeply disturbing; like many people around the world the pictures coming from Abu Gharib prison proved to be incendiary. They too reverted to past practices of blaming the U.S. Yet, the same party almost succeeded in getting a resolution allowing the basing of U.S. troops on Turkish soil for a second front in the Iraq passed through Parliament.

For the secular politicians who had benefited from the Ocalan return, such as former Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the U.S. was a never a trusted friend. Ecevit before becoming prime minister in the late 1990s had continuously spewed conspiracy theories regarding U.S. intentions in Turkey and specifically in southeastern Turkey where most of Turkey's Kurds reside. Once in power he curtailed his diatribes against the United States. However, having dismally lost in the last parliamentary elections, he has returned to his old themes of blaming

the U.S. for just about everything. These include the dispatching of a World Bank Vice President, Kemal Dervis, in 2001 to destroy his coalition government never mind the fact that Dervis went to Turkey as economy minister following the worst economic crisis in modern Turkish history at the request of Ecevit. Similarly, fully cognizant of the kinds of crisis in U.S.-Turkish relations it would engender, Ecevit has recently called for a unilateral Turkish military intervention against Iraqi Kurds and in support of the Turkmen in northern Iraq.

Ecevit's other center-left counterpart Deniz Baykal has demonstrated that harming relations with the U.S. is a price worth paying if it serves his immediate political interests. In his case, he opened himself to ridicule by letting it be known that if people were challenging his leadership in the Republican People's Party, they were being actively encouraged to do so by Washington.

The Turkish military has not been immune to anti-American sentiments either. It took a determined speech by the Turkish General Staff Chief Hilmi Ozkok in late April to articulate a coherent statement on relations with America. Earlier this year, one of the most senior Turkish generals, Hursit Tolon, openly accused the U.S. and Iraqi Kurds of complicity in the murder of 5 Turkish security personnel en route to Baghdad from Turkey when Iraqi insurgents ambushed them. In a country where the military is the most revered institution, Tolon's words were taken as fact. Tolon reflects the anxiety within the Turkish officer corps for whom the potential emergence of a Kurdish state constitutes a threat to the very nature of Turkish state and its regime the military has vowed to protect. The inability of the Washington to devote resources as it promised to fighting the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish insurgent group holed up in the mountains in northern Iraq, has not helped American credibility with the powerful military either. It is not perhaps surprising to see columnists close to Turkish officers talk, as they did in these last few weeks, of a psychological war being conducted by the U.S. against Turkey.

What we have seen in recent weeks and months in terms of negative, downright prejudicial Turkish press reporting on the US, the Iraqi war, and by extension Jews and the Jewish role in America is a reflection of the general unease with which the Turks are approaching the future. Many Turks see the EU, which was supposed to provide the new anchor for Turkish reforms and further integration with the West, as a poisoned chalice precisely because it proscribes changes that will force the radical transformation of the Turkish political space. Inevitably, this would entail the articulation of dissident voices and demands--primarily, although not exclusively, Kurdish ones--which they fear will undermine the unity of the republic.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Since Iraq and specifically northern Iraq is what is at the root of our difficulties with Turkey, it is imperative that we take the bull by the horn and start addressing the issues squarely and honestly. Turks and Americans have to engage in a dialogue that helps clarify the potential scenarios and contingencies in Iraq. Eventually both the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds have to be pulled into this discussion that must necessarily begin quietly and away from prying eyes. Iraqi Kurds also have a stake in having a good relationship with Ankara and the election of the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani to the Presidency of Iraq provides an important opportunity. Not only does he represent a Kurdish willingness to be part of Iraq and not secede – Turkey’s nightmare scenario – but he has always been a strong advocate of relations with Turkey because the latter represents Iraq’s and the Iraqi Kurds’ most direct link to the West. In that, Iraq’s Kurds are ironically Turkey’s and the West’s most formidable ally: they are neither Arab nationalists nor are they prone to fundamentalist tendencies. Hence, they represent a moderating influence on any future Iraqi government. Engaging in a dialogue as soon as possible will not only help the two sides narrow their differences but also help assuage Turkish worries and insecurities.